

SISTER CHRISTOPHER HEGARTY: 1945-2019

AN APPRECIATION

A loyal friend, a strong woman of faith and a humble, gentle person

Sister Christopher (Veronica) Hegarty, former principal of Derry's Thornhill College, who passed away recently, has been recalled as a person of deep devotion, great humility and inspirational faith.

Sister Christopher, a member of the Northern Province of the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy Order, died on May 8 last.

She had a life-long connection with Thornhill as a pupil, teacher and, eventually, principal.

After leaving Thornhill, Sister Christopher was a member of the NI Education Authority (EA).

Veronica Hegarty was born on April 1, 1945 to George and Sarah Hegarty, Patrick Street, Derry, the third eldest in a household of 13 (with 8 brothers and 2 sisters).

A young Veronica began her educational journey at St. Eugene's Primary School on Francis Street, where she was taught in her first year by Sister Cecelia. It was during this time that she fostered a love of Irish and started to attend Mass on a daily basis.

Having transitioned to Thornhill College in 1956, her love of languages alongside music continued to flourish and she studied A-Level Irish, French and Music.

It was in her last year at the school (1962), following a school retreat, that she received the calling to enter the religious life.

Having initially considered the missions and the Columban Sisters, it was Sister Paschal who asked Veronica if she had considered joining the Sisters in Derry. After conversing with the Superior, Sister Gertrude, and reflecting on the life and influence of the foundress, Catherine McAuley, she decided to enter the Order of the Sisters of Mercy in Pump Street on January 6, 1962, resolving: "This is where I want to be."

Growing up in a family where faith in God was a core value and something implicit in the lives of her parents, it was no surprise that Veronica was inspired to give her life to God. In her own words she saw it as "a call to develop one's own humanity and to bring the love and compassion of Christ to the world of today." And so it was

that a young Veronica Hegarty left Thornhill College before the Christmas break and returned following the holidays as a postulant, wearing a long black dress with white cuffs and a mantilla, with her teachers now referring to her as 'Sister.'

She found herself in the unusual position of receiving instruction in her lessons from the Sisters of Mercy while, at the same time, joining them as a fellow of the Order in the Convent for her lunch.

Following two years Novitiate, Sister Christopher took her first vows (for three years initially) and, in 1965, headed off to Queen's University, Belfast, where she undertook an Arts Degree in Celtic Studies and English. It was during her last year at university, in 1967, that she made her final Profession (December, 1967) and cemented her commitment to religious life with the Sisters of Mercy. Following the completion of her degree, she decided to attend St. Patrick's College in Maynooth where she completed her Higher Diploma in Education and a Diploma in Theology and embarked upon her teaching career.

In 1969, Sister Christopher returned to Thornhill College as an Irish and Religious Education teacher. It was here, apart from a two-year break (1980-1982), that she remained until her retirement as the school's principal in 2001. During her time at Thornhill College, Sister Christopher's influence extended far beyond the confines of the classroom. In the 1970s, she was instrumental in her involvement with youth work and, in particular, The Friday Night Club and the Club House in Malin Head along with Mr. McDowell and Mr. Boucher.

Her dedication to the school community and commitment to the girls of Thornhill was recognised with her appointment as vice-principal in 1986 and, then, as principal in 1988, a position she assumed with great personal pride and honour.

During her more than 30 years of service to Thornhill College and its wider community, Sister Christopher encouraged not only academic excellence through her unstinting professional



The late Sister Christopher Hegarty.

leadership but also a pastoral concern for all. She was particularly generous in her outreach and support for those who felt excluded or living on the margins of society.

Sister Christopher was well known for her gentle nature, her even-handedness, her commitment to people, to listening to them, understanding them, accompanying them in the realities of life.

Colleagues say they will always remember her as a tireless worker, an innovative leader and enabler, an ardent advocate of inclusive, holistic Catholic education, a loyal friend and a strong woman of faith, imbued with quiet determination and inspiring hope.

Throughout her tenure as the last Sister of Mercy Principal at Thornhill College, Sister Christopher displayed a great vision for Catholic education in N. Ireland. She worked tirelessly with State and Church representatives

on the planning, development and ultimate completion of the new purpose built Thornhill College which will forever remain her legacy and which thousands of young women continue to benefit from today.

Sister Christopher had a vision for peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland and she encouraged many cross community initiatives within school at a difficult and fragile time in Derry.

After her term of office on the Provincial Leadership Team, Sister Christopher worked as Chair of the Board of Management, Scoil Mhuire, Buncrana, Co Donegal and was a member of both the Conference of Religious of Ireland (CORI) NI Commission and was President of the St. Vincent de Paul Society in Steelstown.

Furthermore, in 2015, she was appointed to the Board of the newly created Education Authority which replaced the five former Education

and Library Boards. She was scrupulously attentive to the demands of this challenging role, representing the Catholic Trustees until illness forced her to step down after her all-too-short tenure.

As a devoted Sister of Mercy, Sister Christopher was humble, gentle, deeply spiritual and contributed greatly to the Order of Mercy. She was appointed Assistant Provincial Leader of the Northern Province of the Sisters of Mercy and moved from her beloved Derry to Clogher where she worked passionately for the continued faith formation and development of the Mercy Order.

The staff and students, both past and present, of Thornhill College, give many thanks and unreserved praise for the life of Sister Christopher and she will be remembered as a person of great devotion, great humility and inspirational faith, as a person who displayed exemplary service to education and

as a leader who showed great wisdom and vision to all who knew her.

Thornhill College will always strive to maintain and develop the school motto, "Adveniat Regnum Tuum," Thy Kingdom Come which, coincidentally, was Sister Christopher's Profession motto and which she profoundly and graciously exemplified in both her professional and personal life.

May her gentle and faithful soul, rest in the eternal Mercy of God.

Sister Christopher's Requiem Mass took place in The Immaculate Conception Chapel, Thornhill, on May 11.

The Mass was celebrated by Fr. Colum Clerkin, Parish Priest of Culmore and 10 other priests.

The Prayers of the Final Commendation were led by Archbishop Eamon Martin of Armagh.

Sister Christopher was laid to rest in the adjoining cemetery.